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AFTER SIXTY SECONDS of television commercial, the large man came to the screen for his epilogue. He sighed regretfully. "Of course Miss Haskins, the tea cup murderer, was apprehended by the vigilant police eventually. We thought

you might like to know that if you can't stand those happy endings for bad people." He closed his eyes for a moment of critical distaste. "And next week we'll be bringin' you the strange story . . ."

I adjusted my glasses and con-

FAIR PLAY

"I won't kill you with arsenic," she said. "It's too easy to detect."



BY

JACK RITCHIE

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FAIR PLAY

sulted our program guide. My wife Edna's voice was rich with scorn. "That stupid woman. Arsenic is out. It's too easy to detect. An autopsy gets them every time."

I got up and switched to another channel. "What would you use, dear?"

I regulated the brightness and the sound and returned to my easy chair. I folded my hands. About a minute later, it came to me. Edna hadn't answered the question.

I turned my head to look at her.

Her fingers were busy with her knitting, but her eyes were in a world that brought a self-satisfied smile to her lips.

I felt a draft of uneasiness. "Are you all right?"

She remembered me and frowned. "Who said I'd use poison? I haven't mentioned a thing about it." The ice cubes in her glass of soda rattled as she took a sip.

My eyes went back to the television set. A detective was describing the wretched city he lived in. It was hot and humid and Tuesday and twelve minutes after eight when he checked in at headquarters.

I stole a glance at Edna. She was still Madame Defarge to me after fifteen years of marriage. Her lips moved, counting the stitches, but I had the feeling she was simply practicing for something bigger.

I tapped the tips of my fingers together and watched the set. A

woman's body had been discovered. She had been brutally beaten. Her husband couldn't be found. Suspicion? Murder.

I leaned forward.

Edna's voice was sharp. "Can't you get something else?"

I was defensive. "Now be fair, Edna. Just because this time the victim is a woman I don't think . . ."

Her eyes were cold. "I said I wanted another channel. That means right now."

Edna is a big woman and I am a small man. I have been aware of this for some time. I turned to a quiz program. A taxi driver was making his twenty-seventh appearance.

"Henry," Edna asked after a while. "Have you paid the premium on your insurance this month?"

"Yes, dear. And I paid yours too."

She sniffed. "I still think it's a waste of money to insure me."

"No, it isn't dear," I said absently. "You never know when something might happen."

She stared at me with narrow eyes.

I got to my feet. "I'm out of cigars, dear. I think I'll go down to Miller's and get some. I'll be right back."

It was a thoughtful walk for me. I played with a suspicion.

Mr. Miller handed me the five nickle cigars. "Did you get rid of the rats, Henry?"

I lit a cigar. "What rats?"

"The ones your wife talked about when she got the poison."

I rolled the cigar in my mouth pensively.

Mr. Miller chuckled. "Don't you worry about her poisoning you, Henry. That stuff I sold her is harmless to dogs, cats, and humans." He kept grinning. "She seemed a little disappointed when I told her."

My cigar seemed to taste better.

He leaned on the counter. "Besides, if she wanted to poison you, Henry, she could just as well get something better from that brother of hers. He's a chemist too and he can lay his hands on all kinds of stuff."

I could see Gerald's sneaky face right now. I had to look at it eight hours a day at the laboratory.

On the walk back home, I ground my teeth several times.

Edna's eyes held a glitter when I entered the living room. "If you're hungry, you'll find two sandwiches in the refrigerator. They're wrapped in wax paper."

I was thoughtful as I walked into the kitchen. The sandwiches were on the second shelf.

I unwrapped one and lifted the top slice of rye.

Ah, ha! On the swiss cheese, and principally in the holes, I detected small grains of a white powder.

The second sandwich was exactly the same.

By George, she wanted to make sure.

I was quietly furious and almost stamped my foot.

Emma was rushing me into immediate action.

I hadn't planned to get rid of her until the end of the week.

I re-wrapped the sandwiches and hid them behind a canister on one of the top cabinet shelves.

I went to the refrigerator. Yes, I thought, lettuce and tomato sandwiches. Edna liked them because they were low in calories.

I prepared two and cut them diagonally.

I smiled to myself and rubbed my hands. Now for the seasoning. I got the small cardboard carton I'd hidden in the toe of my overshoes in the back hall and used the powder liberally on one of the sandwiches. I thought that was clever of me. I might have to eat the other one if Edna got suspicious.

I had just returned the poison to my hiding place when Edna walked into the kitchen.

Her eyes flicked to the sandwiches. "What are you doing?"

I laughed lightly. "Just making you a couple of sandwiches, dear."

Her eyes surveyed them suspiciously. "How come?"

"Now, dear," I said. "You act as though I'd never made sandwiches for you before."

"Let's just say you never volunteered until now." She looked me over carefully. "Did you eat your sandwiches?"

"Yes, dear."

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"Hm," she said slowly. "I must say that you ate them extremely fast." She made her voice casual. "How did they taste?"

"Delicious, dear." I smiled and raised an inquiring eyebrow. "Well . . . perhaps just a trifle metallic?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped. "I told you that only a fool would use . . ." She frowned and went to the step-on garbage can. "Well, I see that you ate the wax paper too."

She came back to the kitchen table and put her hands on her hips. She picked up a sandwich and lifted a triangle of bread.

The woman didn't trust me.

At the same time, however, I was pleased. My powder had melted and left no trace.

Edna eyed me thoughtfully. "Why don't you have one of these too, Henry?"

I picked a section of the safe sandwich, but I didn't get it to my mouth.

Her hand went over my wrist. "I'll take that one."

She smiled like a cat as she elevated it to her mouth.

I smiled too. It was just a nervous smile, but evidently Edna didn't think so.

She put the sandwich down uneaten. "I don't believe I'm hungry. I'll just have a glass of milk."

Edna got the bottle out of the refrigerator and poured herself a glass. She paused and her eyes searched me.

She went to the cupboard and got a bowl. "On second thought, I believe I'll make eggnog." Her smile was firm. "For both of us. You watch what I put into it because you're going to drink half of it. I wouldn't want either one of us to get indigestion."

When the nog was done, I took a very small sip and waited.

Edna did the same and indicated that it was now my turn.

It took us ten minutes to finish our glasses.

We both felt quite confident as we went back into the living room to watch television.

The Inspector, a man with an eye patch, was explaining an interesting point. "Ah," he said. "The reason Mr. Lawrence did not succumb, even though he drank the same tea as Sir Anthony, is that he had, through the course of months, built up an immunity to the poison. Every day he took just a little bit, until . . ."

Edna beat me to the bathroom. I had to go out into the back yard.

I didn't sleep that night and I know that Edna didn't either. I lay in the moonlight, quite hungry, and evaluated the situation. It was absolutely clear. We were antagonists and only one of us could survive. The cleverer one.

That was what put the issue in doubt.

I considered other methods. A blunt instrument? Good heavens, no. Edna would probably wrest the

weapon from me and bash my brains in.

Hire a killer? But where could I find one? Besides, he would probably be too expensive. Edna would never give me the money.

I wasn't worried about disposing of the body. That would be simple. I would drive out into the country late at night and find a secluded place to bury her. The police would be suspicious about her disappearance, of course, but what could they prove without a body?

The real problem was to get her to take the poison.

The answer came to me at five o'clock in the morning. I sat up in bed, pleased with myself.

Edna rose on one elbow. "Why the hell don't you go to sleep?"

I was elated by the tone of her voice. Evidently she hadn't come up with anything yet.

I got up at seven and went downstairs. Edna hadn't made my breakfast in fourteen years and I knew that she wouldn't start now. Not even to keep an eye on me.

She was probably lying in bed, smiling to herself, and thinking that I could adulterate anything I had a mind to, but she wouldn't be tricked into tasting a thing in the house. Perhaps she was even hoping that I'd manage to poison myself with some devilish thing she'd spiked.

I chuckled to myself as I made my solution and poured it into the tray.

At seven-thirty I left the house so that I could have a leisurely and secure breakfast at a cafeteria before going to the laboratory.

During the course of the day I beamed at Gerald twice. The first time he dropped an Erlenmeyer flask. The second, he burned the small finger of his left hand with a mild solution of hydrochloric acid.

At five, I was out of my lab coat and going to the elevators.

When I reached my house, I opened the front door with my key and listened.

There was silence. Big beautiful silence.

Out of respect for the dead, I walked into the living room on tiptoe.

Edna lay sprawled on the sofa, an empty glass on the rug next to her. She had taken the pause to refresh that I had anticipated, and she had paid for it. I notice that she had been careful. The large bottle of soda on the cocktail table was a different brand from those in the refrigerator. She must have gone out to get it.

I bent over her to make certain that she was dead. There was still a certain formidability about her, but it was not that of the living.

I went into the kitchen and emptied all the ice cube trays into the sink. It hadn't entered Edna's mind that there was enough poison in any one of the cubes to kill two or three people.

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I felt a sense of freedom. Of exhilaration, actually.

Perhaps that is what gave me the physical strength to drag Edna's body to the car later that night.

Really, that woman was grossly over-weight.

It was beautiful and star-lit in the country and when I cleaned the earth from my shovel, the moon still rode high in the early morning sky.

I drove home with the window of my car open and drank the bracing air.

I'd have to get rid of all the food in the house, of course. Everything that was eatable and drinkable. I smiled to myself. I couldn't very well allow Edna to kill me now that she was dead.

And I'd have to report Edna's disappearance to the police. There would be no elaborations. I would simply state that she had left last night, saying that she was going to a neighborhood movie, and that she hadn't returned.

I hadn't noticed her absence until this morning because I had gone

to bed early.

At home, I went to bed and slept until the alarm rang. I sang in my shower and then went to the bathroom mirror to shave.

Poor Edna. That ice cube business had been pure genius. The old brain was really clicking that time.

I thought about poisons fondly as I shaved. About the varieties and classes, the metallics, the alkalo-

ids. Now take curare, for instance. It has to be injected directly into the blood stream itself to be effective. Perhaps I should have tried one of the derivatives we have at the laboratory.

I dabbed iodine on a small cut on my chin.

That stuff was so powerful that even if you diluted it with . . .

I stared at my reflection and my hand went to the cut.

"Now, Edna," I said out loud. "That was a dirty trick."

I shook my head at the insidiousness of it.

"That was really . . . really . . . a dirty . . ."



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